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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Forty-seventh session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 514th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 10 October 1996, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. MCHUMO (United Republic of Tanzania)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.25 p.m.

REPORTS RELATING TO PROGRAMME OVERSIGHT (agenda item 7) (A/AC.96/866, 869, 869/Add.1 and 870)

1. The CHAIRMAN said that the accounts for 1995 were found in document A/AC.96/866, the report of the Board of Auditors in document A/AC.96/869 and UNHCR's response in document A/AC.96/869/Add.1. Members also had before them a review of UNHCR's inspection and evaluation activities in document A/AC.96/870. A detailed discussion of documentation on audit and oversight matters had already been held in the Standing Committee to expedite the work of the plenary.

2. Mr. AMUNATEGUI (Director, Inspection and Evaluation Service) said that, document A/AC.96/870 having been discussed in the Standing Committee, he would confine his remarks to three aspects of internal oversight: its impact, follow-up on recommendations and a description of two management instruments designed to facilitate audits.

3. In its report of 27 September (A/AC.96/865/Add.4), the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions had said that it would be useful for the overview document on UNHCR activities to indicate to what extent changes and improvements were a result of internal audit missions. The Service had attempted to do so through the regional presentations submitted to each Standing Committee. For example, the regional document submitted to the Standing Committee on 16 September 1996, reflected specific results of inspection missions to the Americas and the Caribbean, Mexico City and Asia. Other regional reports also contained brief information on the findings of internal audit missions. In response to the remarks of the Advisory Committee and some delegations on the subject, efforts would focus on making future reports more detailed. He would also point out that improvements in a programme following an inspection mission were the result of a shared effort among colleagues in the field and at headquarters with help and encouragement from the Inspector.

4. The recommendations of each inspection mission were set out in a plan of action directly approved by the High Commissioner and monitored by the Service. Such follow-up was crucial to the ultimate success of an inspection. Three months after the inspection report, the Service asked the bureaux for a report on the status of implementation, after which it organized a meeting with the programme managers to discuss content. A summary record of that meeting was then sent to the Bureau, with a copy to the High Commissioner, indicating whether the level of implementation was satisfactory. The same procedure was followed a year later, after which the matter was closed until the next inspection visit.

5. Two management instruments developed to facilitate internal audit activities had become operational: a computerized database, which included all inspection and evaluation reports and provided a means of tracking the implementation of recommendations and an Inspection Handbook, based on experience gained during inspections, in 38 countries since July 1995. The Handbook contained detailed information on the inspection function and made for a common approach.

6. Mr. BRUUN (Denmark), speaking on behalf of the Nordic countries, expressed satisfaction that the oversight issue was a recurrent item on both the Executive Committee's and Standing Committee's agendas. Oversight reports were being dealt with in a systematic manner and full use was being made of them as tools of governance.

7. The report of the Board of Auditors (A/AC.96/869) contained an abundance of well-founded observations, which would need further action by UNHCR and the Standing Committee. He noted with particular appreciation that it clearly reflected follow-up action taken by UNHCR in relation to observations in previous reports. The Nordic countries attached particular importance to the Board's recommendation on the need for precise and well-defined performance indicators for implementing partners. That raised the broader question of how and to what extent UNHCR monitored and assessed the performance of implementing partners. He would welcome a discussion of the matter in the Standing Committee, also in the light of the observations on NGO performance in the joint Rwanda evaluation published earlier in the year. He appreciated the Standing Committee's intention to look into the cluster of procurement-related audit observations and trusted that the problems raised by the auditors would be addressed in the coming year.

8. Having taken a very keen interest in the issue at the Committee's previous session, and subsequently in the Standing Committee, the Nordic countries were gratified to see that UNHCR had elaborated a set of draft guidelines for the audit of implementing partners. They hoped that a decision - based on the recommendations of the Office of Internal Oversight Services and of the External Audit - would be taken as soon as possible.

9. As the Nordic countries had been staunch supporters of the establishment of the position of Inspector of Operational Activities, they also welcomed the very thorough and comprehensive report on the inspection and evaluation activities undertaken in 1996. They urged UNHCR to increase and intensify efforts in that field, something that would have a major impact on donor confidence. They therefore appreciated UNHCR's intention to strengthen the Inspection and Evaluation Service within the framework of Project Delphi by creating an internal oversight service. The question whether such a service should include the internal audit was, however, one that the Standing Committee would need to consider further.

10. Important progress had been made in the evaluation of UNHCR's programme activities in the past year. The joint evaluation of the international response to the Rwanda emergency had been a major step towards a more systematic evaluation of humanitarian assistance. He welcomed the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, which had been discussed in the Standing Committee, and was particularly pleased that UNHCR's follow-up would be further discussed in the Standing Committee. In the light of that experience, the Nordic countries strongly recommended that more joint evaluations be conducted, in cooperation with other agencies, donors and asylum countries.

11. Mr. AMUNATEGUI (Director, Inspection and Evaluation Service) thanked the representative of Denmark for his constructive comments. The Service was in the process of strengthening oversight activities within the new Delphi concept, and meetings would be held in Geneva with representatives of the

Office of Internal Oversight Services by the end of the month. The suggestion to increase the number of evaluation studies and to include participation by donors and other agencies would be taken very seriously. The model for the Mozambique evaluation, which had included participation by donors and non-governmental organizations, was an interesting one in that regard.

12. The CHAIRMAN said that the draft decision on programme, administrative and financial matters was now being distributed. To give members time to study it, he suggested that it should be considered when the Committee came to adopt the draft report.

13. It was so decided.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE WORKING METHODS (agenda item 8) (A/AC.96/868)

14. The CHAIRMAN said that, as the Executive Committee concluded its first cycle of work following the new working methods introduced at its forty-sixth session (A/AC.96/860, para. 32), it needed to consider to what extent it wished to institutionalize those new methods and how it wished to follow up one item left outstanding in last year's decision: the enhanced participation of observer delegations in the plenary and in the Standing Committee.

15. Mr. HALL (Secretary of the Executive Committee) said that, if the Committee decided to adopt its new working methods on a definitive basis, it might wish to introduce a number of minor amendments to its rules of procedure. Annex II to document A/AC.96/868 contained the proposed amendments, which he briefly explained. Rules 43 bis and 43 ter regulated the situation of Governments and intergovernmental organizations admitted as Observers to meetings of the Standing Committee. In that connection, a list of applicants for observer status in the Standing Committee would be introduced under agenda item 9, on the basis of a decision taken by the Executive Committee in 1988 but not reflected in the rules of procedure so far. An amendment was consequently suggested to cover that procedure.

16. When the new working methods had been introduced, the Executive Committee had decided not to consider the question of increased participation by non-governmental organizations in the plenary and the Standing Committee until the working methods had been implemented and their full implications assessed. It might therefore establish a process of consultations on that question for discussion in the Standing Committee in 1997.

17. Mr. NORBERG (Sweden) said that, after one year of experience with the Executive Committee's revised working methods, Sweden essentially shared the positive assessments set out in document A/AC.96/868. The intersessional Standing Committee meetings had been an increasingly useful forum for consultation on issues of key importance to effective implementation of the UNHCR mandate in a dramatically changing political environment. Before the reform of the Executive Committee's working methods could be completely assessed, however, it was necessary to analyse the outcome of the 1996 session and the process leading to the conclusions it would adopt. The selection of a theme for discussion was a positive step, but a weakness remained at the level of interchange of views and fruitful debate.

18. The success of the new working methods and Project Delphi, which were linked, could only be measured against a demonstrated improvement in operational quality, cost-effectiveness and impact on UNHCR's activities. In that respect, more analytical reporting would lead to greater transparency and make accountability a clearer concept.

19. As to the participation of NGO Observers in the work of the plenary and the Standing Committee, his delegation agreed with the decision to initiate consultations, bearing in mind revised arrangements for NGO consultations with the Economic and Social Council and the discussions to take place at the fifty-first session of the General Assembly.

20. The CHAIRMAN said that a revised version of the draft decision on Executive Committee working methods was being distributed. To give members time to study it, he suggested that it should be considered when the Committee came to adopt the draft report.

21. It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 4 p.m.